

# Anapest



## DEFINITION

What is an anapest? Here's a quick and simple definition:

An anapest is a three-syllable metrical pattern in poetry in which two unstressed syllables are followed by a stressed syllable. The word "understand" is an anapest, with the unstressed syllables of "un" and "der" followed by the stressed syllable, "stand": Un-der-**stand**.

Some additional key details about anapests:

- Metrical patterns in poetry are called feet. An anapest, then, is a type of foot. The other feet are: [iamb](#)s, [trochee](#)s, [dactyl](#)s, and [spondee](#)s.
- The opposite of an anapest is a [dactyl](#), a metrical foot consisting of a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables (as in the word "**Po**-e-try").
- Oddly enough, the stress pattern of the word "anapest"—stressed unstressed unstressed—is that of a dactyl.
- The light rhythm of the anapest lends itself to lighthearted, comic poetry, such as in limericks and even many Dr. Seuss stories.

## Anapest Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce anapest: **an-uh-pest**

## Anapests in Depth

In order to understand anapests in more depth, it's helpful to have a strong grasp of a few other literary terms about poetry. We cover each of these in depth on their own respective pages, but below is a quick overview to help make understanding anapests easier.

- **Poetry:** Also referred to as "verse," poetry is a genre of literature that consists of writing that is arranged into lines that often follow a pattern of rhythm, [rhyme](#), or both. The three main types of poetry are:
  - **Formal verse:** Poetry with a strict meter (rhythmic pattern) and rhyme scheme.
  - **Blank verse:** Poetry with a strict meter but no rhyme scheme.
  - **Free verse:** Poetry without any strict meter or rhyme scheme.
- **Stress:** In poetry, the term stress refers to the emphasis placed on certain syllables in words. For instance, in the word "happily" the emphasis is on the first syllable ("hap"), so "hap" is the first "stressed" syllable and the other two syllables ("pi" and "ly") are "unstressed."
- **Foot:** In poetry, a "foot" refers to the rhythmic units that make up lines of [meter](#). An anapest is one type of foot.
- **Meter:** A pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables that defines the rhythm of lines of poetry. Poetic [meters](#) are named for the

*type* and *number* of feet they contain. For example, *anapestic pentameter* is a type of meter that contains five anapests per line (thus the prefix "penta," which means five).

## Accentual vs Quantitative Verse and Anapests

The term anapest takes on a different meaning depending on the type of verse in which it's used: accentual verse or quantitative verse.

- **Anapests in accentual verse:** Accentual verse is poetry in which the meter derives from the stress, or emphasis, placed on certain syllables. Metered verse in English is almost *always* accentual verse. Anapests in accentual verse consist of the unstressed-unstressed-stressed metrical pattern described so far.
- **Anapests in quantitative verse:** Quantitative verse is poetry in which the meter derives from the *length* of syllables, not from stress. Here "length" refers to the time it takes to pronounce each syllable. Anapests in quantitative verse consist of three syllables in which the third is pronounced for a longer duration than the first two. Quantitative verse occurs most often in classical Greek and Latin poetry and is almost impossible to write in English.



## EXAMPLES

Anapestic verse has what is called a "rising rhythm" because its emphasis occurs at the end of the foot: da-da-**dum**. This stress pattern gives anapestic verse a light and nimble rhythm that evokes the galloping of a horse or the rolling of ocean waves. In the examples below we've highlighted the stressed syllables in **red** and the unstressed syllables in **green**.

## Anapests in Byron's "The Destruction of Sennacherib"

In this excerpt—the first stanza of Byron's poem "The Destruction of Sennacherib"—you can clearly see the unstressed-unstressed-stressed metrical pattern throughout. This poem is a famous example of anapestic meter, because every foot is an anapest and also because it is a poem about someone riding a galloping horse which mentions rolling waves, two things to which the rhythm of anapests are often compared.

The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,  
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;  
And the sheen of their spears were like stars on the sea,  
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.

## Anapests in Browning's "How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix"

Another example of a famous anapestic poem is Robert Browning's "How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix." This poem, like the previous example, is also set on horseback. In the first stanza alone, the word "gallop" is used five times.

I sprang to the stirrup, and Joris, and he;  
I galloped, Dirck galloped, we galloped all three;  
'Good speed!' cried the watch, as the gate-bolts undrew;  
'Speed!' echoed the wall to us galloping through;  
Behind shut the postern, the lights sank to rest,  
And into the midnight we galloped abreast.

Notice that the lines do not begin with anapests, but rather [iamb](#)s (a commonly-used metrical foot with two syllables, unstressed-unstressed). This addition of non-anapests into anapestic verse is common, and is often used to lessen the singsongy (and sometimes tiresome) tone that using such a regular anapestic rhythm without variation can produce.

### Anapests in Masefield's "Sea Fever"

John Masefield's famous poem "Sea Fever" is a more complex example of anapestic verse. He intersperses anapests throughout the poem at irregular intervals, also sometimes making use of [iamb](#)s (stressed-unstressed) and [spondees](#) (stressed-stressed). Here are two lines from the poem:

I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky  
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by...

Whereas anapests are often used to create a feeling of speed and regularity, here Masefield uses anapests irregularly to create an uneasy "seasick" feeling throughout the poem, mirroring the motion of a ship being tossed on the waves.

### Anapests in Dr. Seuss's *Horton Hears a Who!*

Dr. Seuss wrote many of his children's books in anapestic tetrameter (a metrical form in which each line has four anapestic feet). Here, the beginning of *Horton Hears a Who!* gives a clear example of the form.

On the fifteenth of May, in the jungle of Nool,  
In the heat of the day, in the cool of the pool,  
He was splashing... enjoying the jungle's great joys...  
When Horton the elephant heard a small noise.

Notice how, to add variation to the rhythm, Seuss shifted the beginning of the fourth line so that it begins with an [iamb](#) rather than an anapest.

### Anapests in Lear's "There was an Old Man with a Beard"

The poet [Edward Lear](#) is famous for his limericks—short, humorous poems consisting of four lines that make use of anapests to create a lighthearted, comedic effect. Limericks usually describe an eccentric figure and give a brief account of some misfortune that befalls them as a result of their eccentricity. This limerick is a well-known classic that follows the formula.

There was an Old Man with a beard,  
Who said, "It is just as I feared!—  
Two Owls and a Hen,  
Four Larks and a Wren,

Have all built their nests in my beard.



## WHY WRITERS USE IT

The galloping rhythm of anapests give poems a naturally jaunty and buoyant feeling that helps the words flow freely, making anapests an ideal metrical foot for lighthearted poems like limericks, children's stories, and jokes. In two of the most famous poems written in anapestic meter—Byron's "The Destruction of Sennacherib" and Browning's "How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix"—the poets match the energetic rhythm of the anapest to their subject matter: both poems tell the stories of riders on horseback.

Compared with the heart-like beat of an iamb (da-dum da-dum), the anapest's unstressed-unstressed-stressed pattern (da-da-dum da-da-dum) accentuates the rhythmic quality of the foot by extending the duration between stresses, which in turn amplifies the emphasis on those stressed syllables. For example, the iambic line "To be, or not to be" has a generally heavier, more clock-like cadence than an anapestic line like "There was an Old Man with a beard." Further, the emphasis on the stressed "Man" and "beard" in the anapestic line is somewhat stronger than the emphasis on the stressed syllables of the iambic line. The result of this more pronounced rhythmic quality is that anapestic verse has a singsongy cadence that has been shown to help with understanding and memorization—another reason why writers like Dr. Seuss may have gravitated to the form.

While one benefit of the anapest's singsongy rhythm is that it can help make long, information-heavy poems or poems with complex plots much easier to listen to, the regularity of the rhythm can begin to feel abrasive or tedious if it isn't broken up. Writers often account for this by swapping-out an anapest for a different kind of foot to add variety to a stanza or line—as Seuss commonly does—or by using anapests more sparingly, as Robert Browning does in his famous poem "Sea Fever."



## OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia Page on Anapest](#): A somewhat technical explanation, including various helpful examples.
- [The dictionary definition of Anapest](#): A basic definition that includes a bit on the etymology of anapest (in the original Greek it literally means "struck back," or reversed, since an anapest is the inverse of a dactyl).
- Anapests on YouTube
  - A video that explains [anapestic](#) tetrameter and how it is used in children's books.
  - A film adaptation of the famous anapestic poem "[A Visit from St. Nicholas](#)" by Clement Clarke Moore.
  - A short clip that gives a definition of anapest in the context of the work of [Dr. Seuss](#).



## HOW TO CITE

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